

# Full Body Scanners, Pat-Downs, and Democracy

Lincoln Mitchell, Harriman Institute, Columbia University

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One of the defining characteristics of authoritarian regimes is that travel is suspect. The endless checking of papers, registering passports at hotels and train stations, carrying documents explaining why you have to go where you are going which has been part of life in unfree countries for years is something that most American notice, and are troubled by, immediately upon spending some time in an authoritarian country.

The contrast to the US, for example, is stark. In the US, citizens are free to travel wherever they want. The call of the open road is a deep part of our national consciousness. Of course, many Americans are hassled or even assaulted when they travel because of their ethnic background, appearance or political views, but this generally comes from local people not as part of a systematic effort by the national government to stigmatize travel or to assume that anybody traveling is probably seeking to create problems.

This is now changing in the US. The recent expanded security procedures at most airports have changed from being a time consuming inconvenience to being invasive and almost certain to make most citizens uncomfortable. Regardless of the intent, the result of these new procedures is that all travelers are now treated like suspects, with the assumption of guilt until proven otherwise. The cost of booking an airplane ticket now includes being treated like a criminal by the TSA. While Americans are still legally free to travel, they can no longer travel either at home or abroad, without confronting these invasive and offensive searches because, presumably, every traveler might be a terrorist. The act of traveling is now enough for the authorities, or semi-authorities, to be suspicious.

The assumption underlying these new procedures is that every traveler might be carrying a weapon, or means to make a weapon, that would not be detectable by an ordinary metal detector. The evidence that is most frequently used to justify this argument is that Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, better known as the Christmas Day Bomber, was able to get on board his flight despite metal detectors but might have been caught by these new security systems. It is true that every traveler might be hiding a bomb, or the materials necessary to make a bomb in his or her undergarments, but the likelihood of this, in most cases, is extremely small.

It is unlikely that anybody at the Department of Homeland Security really believes this either because if they believed that every traveler might have a bomb, than that belief would have to be extended to other places as well. If we need full body scanners and pat downs at airports, then it should follow that we also need them for people entering Amtrak trains, subways, crowded buildings, busy streets and the like. This is obviously not possible, so rather than do this at airports, essentially because we can, it would make more sense to rethink the assumptions behind the new system.

The new airport security measures demonstrate a frightening willingness on the part of the government regulators to apply an authoritarian, and ultimately nonsensical, logic to a real, but controllable security problem. Building a security system around the notion that everybody getting on an airplane might have the equipment for making a bomb tucked into their underwear will lead not to making us all feel safer, but to making us all feel like criminals. It reflects failure and laziness on the part of the US government. Rather than crafting a foreign policy that reduces the threat of terrorism, exploring other options such as increasing the security presence on airplanes, better technologies, or conducting longer verbal interviews with passengers before they approach the metal detectors, the government has decided to simply make life difficult or humiliating for all passengers while not really changing the security equation. These new tactics may stop the next underwear bomber, but more realistically it will just push that terrorist attack out of an airport and into a train station, office building or other crowded place.

At stake here is not just how smoothly innocent Americans are allowed to pass through America's airports, but how willing we are to adopt the outlook and approaches of authoritarian regimes in our ongoing quest to root out terrorism. The possibility of a terrorist attack is real, but democratic societies cannot give in to every possible fear without losing their essential democratic character. Moreover, while these new tactics can be explained by national security concerns, it should be remembered that there has never been an authoritarian country that did not have national security concerns which were ultimately used to explain authoritarian behavior. The US is not an authoritarian country, but the logic of the new security measures is not the logic of freedom and democracy.